

Committee on Government Reform

Tom Davis, Chairman



MEDIA ADVISORY

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Davis, Boehner Introduce D.C. School Choice Legislation *Government Reform Committee Hearing Tomorrow*

Washington, D.C. – Government Reform Committee Chairman Tom Davis (R-VA) today joined Education and the Workforce Chairman John Boehner (R-OH) in introducing historic legislation to provide families and children in the District of Columbia with enhanced education choices.

The D.C. Parental Choice Incentive Act of 2003 will expand educational opportunity for students in under-performing D.C. elementary and secondary schools.

The legislation will be the subject of a Government Reform Committee hearing tomorrow, June 24, 2003, at 2 p.m., in Room 2154 of the Rayburn House Office Building. Chairman Boehner, U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige, and D.C. Mayor Anthony Williams will testify at the hearing.

“We all want the District’s education system to improve. I’ve visited the schools many times and seen the conditions under which students are asked to learn. We need to do better,” Davis said. “I’ve come to the conclusion that parents and students stuck in under-performing schools need – no, deserve – an opportunity to choose from a wider pool. I’ve received calls from parents who are frustrated, angry, even distraught by the condition of their children’s school. It’s time to do more than sympathize. This is a moral imperative. This debate should not be about politics. It should be about an honest appraisal of the state of affairs in our public schools, about offering an alternative for students and parents. What we’re proposing is not a mandate, but a choice.”

“This legislation will strengthen the D.C. public schools and give new hope immediately to thousands of low-income families,” Boehner said. “We are throwing a lifeline to children who need immediate new options, and breathing new life into an old system that desperately needs to improve.”

Background

In an effort to provide greater school choice and scholarships for District of Columbia elementary and secondary students, the hearing will continue to examine strategies to enhance academic performance and explore options to improve educational opportunities in the Nation's Capital.

The condition of D.C. schools has continued to concern the Administration and Congress. D.C. schools have been slow in improving test scores, charter schools have shown mixed results, and special education costs have soared. At a Committee on Government Reform hearing on May 9th, U.S. Department of Education, Under Secretary Eugene W. Hickok testified that "the preponderance of information demonstrates that schools in the District are not achieving what they should and that more needs to be done." Hickok also testified about the "seeming inability of public school officials to manage schools and programs effectively."

The goal of scholarships is to enhance, not detract from public or charter schools, by providing choice, competition and additional federal funds to make sure District students get the best education possible. The deterioration of public schools in the District has continued despite the fact that current spending per pupil exceeds all but a handful of school districts in the nation. A D.C. school choice bill will offer parents the chance to embrace their children's education and present their children with more opportunities than the current public schools are currently capable of offering.

The "D.C. Parental Choice Incentive Act of 2003" would provide low-income parents who live in D.C. an opportunity to enroll their children in higher performing private schools in the District. The program will be administered by the US Department of Education. Eligible entities will apply to the Secretary to receive grants. The Secretary will give priority consideration to those applicants that assign priority to students in under-performing schools, target grant resources to low-income students, and provide the broadest range of educational choices. As currently drafted, the program will span five years. The Secretary will choose grantees through a competitive process.

A grantee will use the funds to provide scholarships to eligible students that cover the cost of tuition, fees, and transportation expenses, if any. The parent of the student will receive the scholarship and the grantee must ensure that the funds are not misused.

The maximum amount that a student may receive per academic year is \$7,500. However, since scholarships will be awarded based on financial need, not every child participating in the program will receive the maximum amount. A total of \$15,000,000 is authorized to carry out this program during the first year and such sums as may be necessary for the four fiscal years thereafter.

The Secretary is required to conduct annual evaluations of the program's progress and submit them to Congress. Each grantee must submit an annual activities report to the Secretary on the academic achievement of the students in the program. The Secretary will then prepare for Congress a report based on the information gathered from the grantees. Each grantee must ensure that the participating schools meet at least once a year with the parents to discuss their children's academic achievements.

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